

Ethiopia: Rebels on a Roll

Ethiopian insurgents have made major advances against government forces, which broke and ran during heavy fighting last February and March. Army units later abandoned several northern garrisons, and the rebels now control about twice as much territory as they did last autumn. Available evidence indicates, however, that rebel gains do not threaten President Mengistu's hold on power. The Soviet Union, Ethiopia's primary source of military assistance, remains firmly behind the Ethiopian leader. Intent on preserving its interests in Ethiopia and the country's territorial integrity, Moscow has rushed substantial additional arms to Addis Ababa, supplied more transport aircraft, and—although favoring a political solution to the conflict in the north—is apparently not pressing Mengistu to make major concessions to the northern rebels.

A limited government counteroffensive fizzled in May, but the Army will almost certainly attempt to launch a major operation before the end of the year. Nonetheless, Army morale is low and the armed forces will have difficulty regaining lost ground. Addis Ababa has proclaimed a state of emergency for most of northern Ethiopia, recalled Army veterans, sent untrained conscripts to the front, and levied a stiff war tax on private and corporate incomes.

Background

The secessionist Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) began to press government forces near Nakfa last October and by the end of 1987 had pushed Army forces southward about 25 miles—despite the Army's clear superiority in men and materiel. During a lull in the fighting in January and February, the government substantially reinforced its main garrisons about 30 miles south of Nakfa at Afabet and Molebso as well as others in western Eritrea.

Meanwhile, rebels of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in mid-February launched a major offensive about 200 miles to the south that clearly

caught Addis Ababa by surprise.

[REDACTED]

Major Rebel Advances

The Army's poor performance in October-February was a prelude to even more serious setbacks in March.

[REDACTED]

Meanwhile, the TPLF seized several towns near the Tigrean capital of Mekele, including the symbolically important city of Adwa, where Ethiopia defeated Italian forces in 1896.

Mengistu again went to the front to oversee operations and ordered the Army to reinforce key facilities in Koren, Asmera, Mekele, and the port of Mitsiwa.

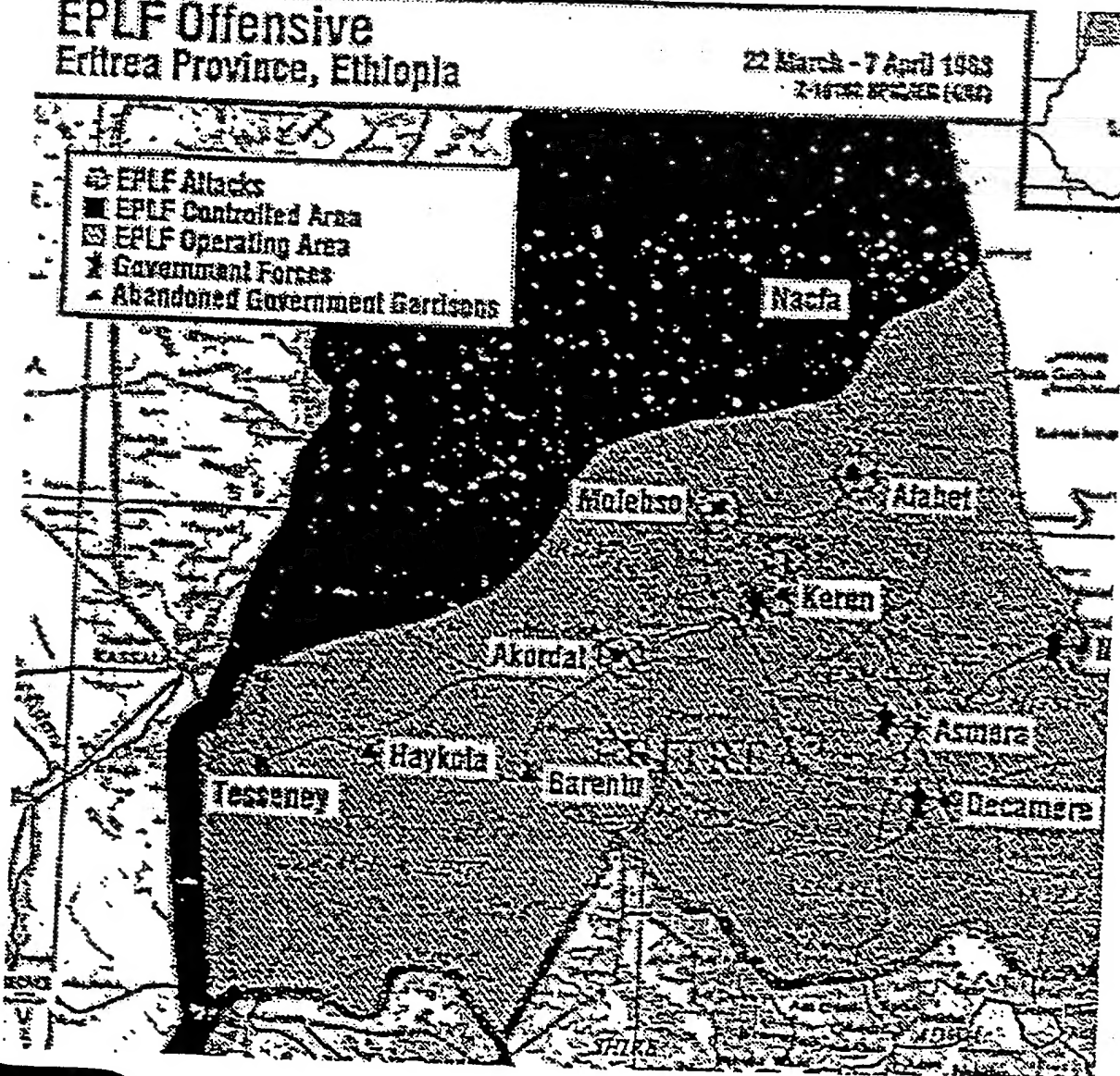
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EPLF Offensive **Eritrea Province, Ethiopia**

22 March - 7 April 1988
 2-16000 HQ (C-2)

- ⊙ EPLF Attacks
- EPLF Controlled Area
- ▨ EPLF Operating Area
- * Government Forces
- ▲ Abandoned Government Garrisons



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Moscow's quick response to Mengistu's request notwithstanding, the Soviets have long urged Ethiopia to seek a political settlement to the northern conflict.

[REDACTED]

Moscow has often publicly affirmed its support for Ethiopian unity while advocating "autonomy"—but not independence—for the insurgents.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. Moscow almost certainly opposes an independent Eritrea in part because it might endanger Soviet access to the ports of Mitsuwa and Aseb and access to their naval facilities on Dahlak Island, just off the Eritrean coast.

[REDACTED]

Domestic Policy Consequences

The primary internal consequence of the insurgent advances has been the disruption of Western donor relief assistance to hundreds of thousands of drought-stricken

people in Eritrea and Tigray. Addis Ababa also suspended Western relief flights into Eritrea and Tigray and ordered all foreign relief workers out of the affected provinces in April, contending this was for their own safety. We believe, however, that Mengistu decided on such a course for three main reasons:

- He distrusts Western relief officials and believes they may funnel food to the rebels.
- He wishes to use food as a weapon to punish northern rebels by denying it to their ethnic brethren.
- He wants to reduce the possibility that Western officials will witness government human rights violations or observe military developments that might be of intelligence value to the rebels.

The government has also requisitioned scores of civilian trucks, thereby sharply reducing the number of vehicles available for famine relief.

[REDACTED]

Another serious domestic consequence of the recent rebel gains was Mengistu's decision to declare a state of emergency for most of Eritrea and Tigray in May. This executive order established military councils to govern the provinces and suspended virtually all civil rights in the affected areas, giving security authorities the power to arrest and hold indefinitely anyone suspected of potential disloyalty. The declaration also ordered all persons to vacate a 6 mile (10 kilometer) strip running from Aseb on the Red Sea northward along the coast to Sudan and then down the border with Sudan.

Addis Ababa has also imposed a war tax of one month's pay on all workers—an onerous requirement in a poor country where the government has not granted a pay raise since 1977. A comparable requirement extends to corporations, farmers, and even pensioners, according to the US Embassy.

[REDACTED]

The Army's poor performance has also had one notable consequence for the EPLF and TPLF: an agreement in April to coordinate political and military strategy against Addis Ababa. In the document, the TPLF also for the first time formally acknowledged the legitimacy of the EPLF's secessionist demands.

Foreign Policy Consequences

The primary foreign policy consequence stemming from Mengistu's military setbacks has been his substantially increased willingness to deal with longtime regional adversaries, Somali President Siad Barre and Sudanese Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi. Ethiopia and Somalia have long been at odds over the Ogaden, a vast, barren territory in eastern Ethiopia populated almost exclusively by ethnic Somalis. The two countries fought a bitter war in the Ogaden in 1977-78 and have sponsored the other's rebels for many years.

Nonetheless, in April, Addis Ababa signed an accord with Mogadishu that ignored border demarcation--Ethiopia's primary concern. The agreement stipulated that the two sides would:

- Reestablish diplomatic relations.
 - Exchange prisoners of war from the 1977-78 conflict.
 - Cease hostile propaganda and subversive activities.
 - Disengage their armed forces from the border area.
- The last provision is obviously the most important to Mengistu because it gives him some assurance that the Somalis will not attack Ethiopia's back door while his Army is occupied in the north.

Several hundred Cuban soldiers, long present in Ethiopia, serve as Mengistu's insurance policy vis-a-vis Siad: they have been redeployed to Jijiga in the northern Ogaden.

The April accord has held up thus far despite attacks in northern Somalia in May and June by Somali National Movement (SNM) rebels, who were formerly based in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. Mengistu quickly dispatched his foreign minister to Mogadishu to assure Siad that Ethiopia played no part in the SNM operations, and--though suspicious that Addis Ababa had foreknowledge of the attacks--Mogadishu has thus far refrained from

accusing Ethiopia of complicity.

Mengistu has also exhibited new flexibility toward Sudan, with which Ethiopia has long been at odds because each supports the other's insurgents. After stonewalling for many months, Ethiopia suddenly displayed renewed interest in Sudanese attempts to establish a dialogue in late March. Technical discussions have taken place in both capitals in preparation for higher level talks.

A second major foreign policy consequence stems from Mengistu's authoritarian reaction to his military setbacks: namely, the universally negative reaction of Western democracies to Mengistu's harsh domestic measures, in particular his suspension of donor food relief. Although we believe that the negative Western reaction is of secondary significance to Mengistu, the Ethiopian leader may become somewhat more receptive to Western overtures if he judges that the rebels might gain meaningful Western political or military support if he remains intransigent.

Outlook

More--and occasionally intense--fighting is virtually certain over the next six months, but neither the rebels nor the government is likely to attain a decisive edge in this 27-year long civil war, the longest lived in Africa. The rebels appear likely to consolidate last spring's gains and prepare for the all but certain government counteroffensive. Many thousands of civilians in Eritrea and Tigray will probably die during the next six months as a result of the civil war, the harsh state of emergency decree, and famine.

Nonetheless, there is as yet no indication that Mengistu's grip on power is eroding. Soviet support is firm, and potential internal opposition is cowed. Although the possibility of a military coup cannot be excluded, there is no reporting that plotting is under way. In short, Ethiopia's next six months probably will strongly resemble its last six--more war, more famine, and more suffering.